

PHIL UN3701

Location: HAM 602

Time: Fall 2018, 1:10pm-2:25pm

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Ethics

1. Course description

The course offers an introduction to and survey of ethical theory. We study four approaches in normative ethics: divine command theory, utilitarianism/consequentialism, Kantian ethics, and virtue ethics. As we examine these theories, we also address metaethical questions about disagreement and the nature of value.

We start by reading Plato's *Euthyphro*, the most influential contribution on divine command theory. Does divinity command norms of piety, or norms of justice, or both? What is the relationship between ethics and religion?

The role of religion in ethics brings us to another question: how should we deal with disagreement? Should we modify our stance when peers disagree with us? Do we hold the views we hold simply because of the ways we grew up and are acculturated?

Next we turn to utilitarianism and consequentialism. According to these approaches, one finds out which action is right by asking which action will bring about the greatest utility, the greatest amount of happiness or pleasure, or more generally the best consequences.

Kant's ethics proposes that, simply by being a reasoner, we are able to determine what is right and what is wrong. We are "self-legislators": our reasoning pronounces on what is right and wrong. Morality is hard because it can be difficult to do what we recognize as right, and our motives are not transparent to us. But it is not hard to see what we should be doing.

Virtue ethics goes back to the influential approaches of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. Here ethics is not about "morality"; instead it is about virtues such as justice, moderation, and being a good deliberator. The final end, it is argued, is to lead a good human life, where this is an ethically good life and at the same time a life the agent wants to lead.

All these views have so-called metaethical dimensions: they defend ideas about the nature of value, about reasons, persons, agency, and more. At the end of the semester, we turn more directly to metaethics. We examine error theory, the view according to which all our ethical judgments are systematically false, simply because there is no "reality" of which they could be true. And we examine naturalism, the view according to which ethics is a theory for human beings as part of nature, to the effect that ethical truths are truths about nature.

2. Readings

It is essential to do the readings prior to the class for which they are assigned. Please note that the class, while introductory, is rather ambitious. Many of our readings are so-called classics: they have had, and continue to have, tremendous influence, and require careful study.

Almost all readings will be available online through Butler Library, either via Courseworks or via JSTOR (log in with your UNI). Two books are ordered at BookCulture: Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (OUP); Kant, *Groundwork* (CUP). When we turn to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, you have two options: Broadie/Rowe's edition, published by Oxford University Press or Reeve's translation, published by Hackett. It is recommended, though not required, that you purchase one of these editions.

3. Requirements

The class involves a range of different assignments. The aim is to practice some of the modes of writing and thinking that are crucial in philosophy.

We have a number of *very* short assignments early on. Here the aim is to help everyone develop the skills in reading and analysis that we'll need throughout the semester.

Some of our assignments are a bit more creative than others, asking you to come up with examples; that's an important dimension of learning how to defend a view on some question.

Some assignments come with detailed instructions; the idea is that, especially early on in the semester, you get lots of input on what is expected, on structuring your papers, etc.

If you have questions, you are always welcome to talk to me and/or the TAs!

There'll be additional input on paper writing, the format, etc., during the discussion sections.

Sections and in-class participation

You are required to attend a section. In-class participation and participation in the discussions in your section count for 15% of your grade. Philosophy involves the ability to formulate arguments, both in writing and in conversation. If you feel that talking in class or during section is hard for you, come and talk to us! There are lots of strategies for getting better at this, and we'll actively practice. This ability is crucial for philosophy. But it also is an "all purpose skill": whatever you'll do in the future, it will help you if you're able to explain a question, formulate a clear but constructive objection, lay out an argument, and engage with other people's contributions. We will come up with exercises that involve not only formulating your own point of view, but also the ability to take in what other people are saying and to genuinely engage with it.

What's involved in making a moral/ethical decision?

Come up with an example for a difficult moral/ethical decision, where you can imagine going both ways, say, helping or not helping someone or lying or not lying. The assignment should be

one page, single-spaced, and contain three paragraphs. Detailed instructions are on the handout for class #2.

Due date: September 12.

The assignment counts for 5% of your grade.

Disagreement

Our second assignment asks you to come up with an example of value disagreement. Detailed instructions are on the handout for class #4.

Due date: September 24.

The assignment counts for 5% of your grade.

Two 1-Page Assignments

The lecture notes for weeks 4 and 5 contain four prompts. Choose two of the four prompts. These prompts are intended to help you think through our readings and apply the concepts we learn.

The first 1-page assignment must be submitted at the latest October 3.

The second 2-page assignment must be submitted at the latest October 10.

The two assignments jointly count for 15% of the total grade.

Midterm exam (in-class)

The midterm exam counts for 25% of the grade.

What's involved in making a moral/ethical decision? – Revisited

3-page paper, due November 19.

Based on our study of ethical theories, we revisit the task of our first assignment. Come up with an example for a difficult moral/ethical decision, where you can imagine going both ways, say, helping or not helping someone or lying or not lying. You can use the example you used in your first assignment, or you can use a new example. Your paper should have three pages:

First page: Explain your example, including two different ways in which one might act. Make sure to offer a precise description of the example and the relevant choices.

Second and third page: Discuss how the agent should go about making her decision, using some of the arguments, terms, and ideas we studied. You can either draw in detail on one reading, exploring how the agent should decide from the point of view of one particular theory; or you can draw on two/three related reasons in order to explore how the agent should decide from the point of view of one particular theory.

The 3-page paper counts for 10% of the grade.

Paper

6-page paper, due at the latest on the last day of classes. Choose one of the readings discussed in class. The paper should be a response paper. This means:

Short introduction: Say which reading you will engage with, which specific question you address, and what your answer to this question is.

Part I: Precise account of the reading or part of the reading that is relevant to your discussion.

Part II: Zoom in on the specific aspect that you want to raise a question about and explain it. Explain also why this question/problem interests you.

Part III: Defend your own analysis/objection/etc. regarding this question.

Summary/conclusion: restate your question and your answer.

The 6-page paper counts for 25% of the grade.

4. Readings and Topics

Week 1: Introduction

09/05: What is ethics?

Week 2: Ethics and Religion

09/10: Plato's *Euthyphro*

09/12: Plato's *Euthyphro*

Week 3: Disagreement

09/17: Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement"

09/19: Kelly continued; beginning of Al Ghazali, "The Rescuer From Error"

Week 4: Ethics, Culture, and Evolution

09/24: Al Ghazali continued and Guy Kahane, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments" (selection)

09/26: Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma" (selection)

Week 5: Utilitarianism and Hedonism

10/01: Mill, *Utilitarianism*

10/03: Selections from Epicurus on "pleasure is the good"

Week 6: Consequentialism and its Critics

10/08: Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism"

10/10: Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* vol. 13 (1984), 134-171

Week 7: Kantian Ethics

10/15: Kant, *Groundwork*, Preface

10/17: Kant, *Groundwork*, Section I

Week 8: Kantian Ethics

10/22: Kant, *Groundwork*, Section II

10/24: Christine Korsgaard, "Responsibility and Relationships"

Week 9: Kantian Ethics

10/29: Kant, *Groundwork*, Section III

10/31: IN CLASS MIDTERM

Week 10: Virtue Ethics

11/05: ACADEMIC HOLIDAY

11/07: Aristotle, *Politics* Book I and *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I

Week 11: Virtue Ethics

11/12: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II.1-6

11/14: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X.6-9 [or Burnyeat]

Week 12: Virtue Ethics

11/19: Myles Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good" [or *NE* X.6-9]

11/21: ACADEMIC HOLIDAY

Week 13: Ancient and Modern Ethics

11/26: Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy"

11/28: Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives"

Week 14: Error Theory and Naturalism

12/03: J. L. Mackie, *Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977), selection

12/05: Peter Geach, "Good and Evil" (1956) <<http://fair-use.org/peter-t-geach/good-and-evil>>

Week 15: Review

12/10: Discussion/review

5. Academic Integrity and Honor Code

Please consult Columbia University's policies on academic integrity as well as Columbia's honor code:

<http://www.college.columbia.edu/academics/academicintegrity>

<https://www.college.columbia.edu/ccschonorcode>

<http://bulletin.columbia.edu/general-studies/undergraduates/academic-policies/academic-integrity-community-standards/>

These policies explain Columbia University's academic regulations and how you can safeguard the integrity of your original work. Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are serious offenses. Please take the time to familiarize yourself with the details of what constitutes plagiarism and academic dishonesty. You are expected to confirm to these policies in your academic work. It is important that you understand that academic dishonesty can lead to disciplinary action, including failure in the course and suspension, or even expulsion, from the University.

6. Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations, students must first be registered with Disability Services. More information on the Disability Services registration process is available online at <www.health.columbia.edu/ods>. Registered students must present an Accommodation Letter to the professor before an exam or other accommodations can be provided. Students who have, or think they may have, a disability are invited to contact Disability Services for a confidential discussion at (212) 854-2388 (Voice/TTY) or by email at <disability@columbia.edu>.